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ABSTRACT

In writing instruction, emphasis should be placed on developing a sense of a community, focusing on the social or collaborative view of writing. This view contends that writing is taught best as collaborative learning, with the classroom providing a social context in which students come together to develop their writing skills. In the collaborative classroom the teacher is a facilitator, setting up an environment for students to work together on all stages of the writing process. Conversation is encouraged, because writing is viewed as internalized talk. A close connection exists between this type of collaborative learning and social constructionism, or the social construction of knowledge. Social constructionism states that meaning is not privately constructed, but is generated by social interaction. Advocates of social constructionism believe that the goal of education is to engage the human community in problem-solving and in an ongoing conversation of humankind. Therefore, if both thinking and writing are seen as forms of conversation, then collaborative learning as it relates to the teaching of writing is a practical outcome of social constructionism. Several teaching strategies can be employed to create a collaborative environment, such as encouraging group work, re-evaluating writing assignments, and redefining the teacher's role in the writing process. (A selected bibliography of social constructionism and collaborative learning in composition is appended.) (MM)

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Social Constructionism and Collaborative Learning: Recommendations for Teaching Writing

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Abstract

This paper asserts that, in the teaching of writing, there should be more emphasis put on the common sense of a community. It focuses on the social or collaborative view of writing, which is based on the idea that writing can be taught best as a form of collaborative learning with the classroom providing a social context in which students can come together to practice the kinds of writing that society values most. The close connection between the social construction of knowledge and collaborative learning is emphasized. Based on the relationship between social constructionism and collaborative learning, some recommendations for teachers of writing are submitted. The paper concludes with some areas of concern (perhaps possible research areas) for those who adopt a social or collaborative approach in teaching writing.

Social Constructionism and Collaborative Learning: Recommendations for Teaching Writing

I'm very happy today to have the opportunity to talk with my peers about the social or collaborative view of writing, which is based on the idea that writing can be taught best as a form of collaborative learning with the classroom providing a social context in which students can come together to practice the kinds of writing that society values most. In this paper, I want to discuss the close connection between the social construction of knowledge and collaborative learning. Based on the relationship between social constructionism and collaborative learning, I will make some recommendations for teachers of writing. Finally, I will conclude by bringing up some areas of concern (perhaps possible research areas) for those who adopt a social or collaborative approach to the teaching of writing.

In the traditionalist classroom, the teacher usually lectures to students who dutifully take notes about the principles of writing, gives writing assignments which students work on in isolation of one another, and then evaluates those assignments. In the collaborative classroom, the teacher is a facilitator, setting up an environment for students to work together on all stages of the writing process from getting ideas, to organizing those ideas, proceeding through several drafts to the completed paper. In such an environment, the line between teacher and learner is abolished, because everyone is viewed as a teacher and learner, and the learning process is viewed as a collaborative effort in which the teacher tutors the student, the student tutors other students, and so forth. In such a classroom, there is a lot of talk, because the belief is that writing is internalized talk. Students are encouraged to engage in conversation at as many points in the writing process as possible. The classroom thus serves as a social context for a particular kind of community, a community of peers, not unlike the kind of community of peers that students will eventually write for in everyday life.

As far as I can determine, the term **collaborative learning** was coined by a group of scholars at Goldsmith's College, University of London, which included Charity James, Leslie Smith, and Edwin Mason; in fact, Mason published a book entitled *Collaborative*

Learning in 1970 which detailed such applications as reading aloud, peer criticism, and small group work. Although the name is less than two decades old, collaborative learning (including peer group work) has a richer tradition than people think. (In glancing at the attached bibliography entitled "The Social Approach to Teaching Composition: Some Antecedents," we note that as early as 1892 some--I'll say enlightened--American composition teachers were developing and focusing a resource that Kenneth Bruffee 80 years later would claim had been overlooked: peer influence. There are many interesting collaborative applications detailed by the people on that list. But, besides Mason, two people of particular interest are Sterling A. Leonard, who argued that students should be motivated by a spirit of hearty co-operation to focus their writing on problems in their environment that they could at least attempt to solve and that students should "be knit into a social group organized for mutual help, and aided to move steadily forward in the arduous way of attaining effective expression . . . " (36); and Robert Zoellner, who proposed replacing the prevailing *think-write* pedagogy with a *talk-write* pedagogy that would treat "writing and the analysis and criticism of writing [as] a social event" (301)). What I hope this digression points out is that the seeds were already planted for what was later to become the collaborative learning movement; in fact, even before Bruffee, teachers were experimenting with such collaborative methods as peer criticism, group writing and revision, teacher-student collaboration, and so forth. Whether or not they fully understood the philosophical implications of collaborative learning, however, is debatable.

Let's turn then to what recent teachers and scholars in the collaborative learning movement have found useful in the connection between the theory of social constructionism and collaborative learning.

Social constructionism is a philosophy of knowledge which asserts that truth is not something eternal or unchanging or that exists apart from humans, but something that is the product of human activity. It is the belief that the relationship between the individual and the world is a dialectical one and that meaning is not privately constructed but is generated by social interaction. Social constructionists believe that the reality of existence is shared with others, whether the other is immediate or distant (see Frost's poem "The

Tuft of Flowers"). They believe that complete understanding depends upon participation in the societal dialectic, upon "seeing ourselves," Clifford Geertz says, "amongst others, a case among cases, a world among worlds . . . " (*Local Knowledge* 16). Of course, like all dialectical processes, this process is played out in language; for, as Karen Burke LeFevre notes, "language is what we use to constitute reality through a dialectic between subject and object, and . . . this is to be understood as a social process, whether we use langauge individually or with others" (8).

There are many scholars, from a variety of fields, who have helped to provide us with this definition. We can look at the prominent Russian social psychologist L. S. Vygotsky, who maintained in *Mind in Society* (1978) that we "not only **act** in attempting to achieve a goal but also **speak**" (24). According to Vygotsky, we learn, very early, to talk through our problems: that is, socialized speech is **turned inward** where it becomes inner speech or thought. Thus, we use socialized speech **instrumentally**, or to get things done. We can look at the historian of science Thomas Kuhn, who in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970) argued that we acquire **group-licensed ways of seeing** through words and useful illustrations of how those words are used, illustrating his argument by telling us of how oxygen was discovered, not by a single individual, but by a group of people which included Antoine Lavoisier, Joseph Priestly, and Carl Wilhelm Scheele. These researchers not only shared ways of seeing, Kuhn asserted, but also the language that is a necessary accompaniment of modes of discovery (52-56). We can look at the philosopher Richard Rorty, who in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) asserted that knowledge is "the social justification of belief" and that confirmation is "a matter . . . of conversation, of social practice" (170). According to Rorty, the knowledge the community generates is the same as the language of that community. The community's language constitutes the community in a way similar to the way the CCCC's constitution constitutes its membership. It brings us together, determines our code of ethics, forms our reality, and even shapes our individuality. In other words, Rorty argued, learning is not "a shift inside the person which now *suits* him [or her] to enter . . . new relationships" with "reality" and with other people. Learning is "a shift in a person's relations with others" (187). We can look at the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who in

The Interpretation of Cultures (1973) and *Local Knowledge* (1983) maintained that the social constructionist theory can be applied to any discipline (such as a composition class) in which interpretation plays a large part in determining the membership. It was Geertz, too, who told us that "human thought is consummately social: social in its origins, social in its functions, social in its forms, social in its applications" (*The Interpretation of Cultures* 360). We can look at the literary critic Stanley Fish, who in *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980) put forth the notion of **interpretive communities**, which are made up of people "who share interpretive strategies . . . for constituting . . . properties. In other words these strategies exist prior to the act of [learning] and therefore determine [knowledge] rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around" (14).

We can look at many others, too: Dewey, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Mead and, given that all of these people are writing at about the same time, I suppose Emile Durkheim. And if we look at all these thinkers, we will find out that there is a close link between the theory of social constructionism and collaborative learning. Social constructionism affirms that people must learn to speak the language of the communities they hope to enter. The term applied to the process of loosening ties in one community in order to join another community for the purpose of socially constructing knowledge is **reacculturation.** Social constructionists believe that this is what education should attempt to accomplish. But reacculturation is virtually impossible to accomplish alone. As a social goal, it must be accomplished through collaboration. We can recall the civil rights and women's movements of the sixties and seventies here. Both groups discovered that, alone, they could do little; but, in the company of a support group, they could accomplish much--*although there is still a way to go.* Collaborative learning is a way of providing our students with a support group, which serves as a transitional, social unit, maintaining the coherence of the students' lives as they are initiated into the experience of a new community and assisting the students to develop competency in the language that constitutes the community they desire to enter.

Now, if we consider both thinking and writing as forms of conversation, then collaborative learning as it relates to the teaching of writing is really a practical outcome of social constructionism. I have suggested that in society meaning is not privately

constructed, but is generated by social interaction, especially conversation. Collaborative learning provides a social context in which students can come together to practice conversation in speaking and writing. If we accept the concept that writing and thinking are forms of conversation and conversation is the means whereby communities of scholars create knowledge, then we must accept the fact that collaborative learning is an extension of social constructionism into the composition classroom. In this view, collaborative learning is simply another way of introducing students to the process by which men and women in society construct knowledge and practice the kinds of conversation that humanists value.

Though we can certainly credit people like Ken Macroirie, Peter Elbow, and Donald Murray with making the teaching of writing more humane in the last 15-20 years, with coming up with small group activities and conferencing models that are useful collaborative applications, their **expressionistic (neo-romantic)** tendencies are not aligned to the instrumental conversations of a truly social or collaborative rhetoric. As Kenneth Bruffee announced in *A Short Course in Writing* (1972), collaborative learning is not merely a diversion in the composition curriculum; it is an entirely alternative approach to the teaching of composition--to teaching period. Bruffee maintained that, in order to learn effective independence, people must first learn effective interdependence. He also saw the importance of tapping into the most unused component in the educational process: students, who would work in collaboration with one another. And, using the ideas he learned from reading people like Vygotsky, Kuhn, Rorty, Geertz, and Fish, as well as those he learned from social group work, he designed a composition course that celebrated the reacculturation of student writers. At one point, Bruffee summoned Michael Oakeshott, who wrote about an **ongoing conversation of humankind**, and he asserted that "students' writing will only be as good as their conversation, especially their conversation about writing" (4). Thus, the Bruffee collaborative classroom initiated students into this ongoing human conversation, and in it we found the "activity of students engaged in conversation with each other as peers about writing, conversation both in its face-to-face form, talking to one another, and in its displaced form, writing to each other" (4). So that he couldn't be charged by traditionalists with committing the

crime of letting the *blind lead the blind*, Bruffee was careful to organize the activities of his class around standards full-fledged members of the writing discipline uphold. Thus, he demanded transactional writing, to use Britton's terminology, looked for unity and coherence, and maintained that students' final works should show the trappings of standard written English. In this way he was able to assert that "by working together--pooling their resources--[student writers] are very likely [enabled] to master [the **normal discourse**, Rorty's term based on Kuhn's idea of normal science,] [of the literate community] . . . ("Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" 10). This would be true because the students' conversations would be structured "by the task or problem that a member of [the literate community, that is, the teacher who has formulated the task according to the 'formal conventions of academic discourse and of standard written English'] provides" ("Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" 10).

So, from reading aloud, Bruffee's students would learn to view their works as the most important texts of the class and to *hear* relationships among ideas. And by displacing their conversations in written peer criticism of one another's writing (*descriptive* or *objective*, that is, learning to say something about a text without commenting on whether or not it is good; *evaluative*, that is, putting into writing what is perceived to be good as well as what can be done to improve a text; *substantive*, that is, a judgment about the content and substance of a piece of writing), students would be taken step-by-step into the discipline of literate writers, starting with low-level involvement and moving to more sophisticated involvement. With progressive practice in reading aloud and in descriptive, evaluative, and substantive peer criticism, students in the Bruffee classroom would learn to interact dialectically with others to produce effective discourse.

Advocates of social constructionism believe that the goal of education is to engage the human community in problem-solving and in an ongoing conversation of humankind. Because I believe that we should put more emphasis on the common sense of a community in teaching composition, I put forth the following recommendations.

The first recommendation is to consider alternative strategies to the *think-write* pedagogy. Rather than fostering the notion that all writers work in isolation, going through the solitary process of thinking about their subject and then writing about it, we

should encourage students to engage in a dialectical process between teacher and student, a process that leans heavily on conversation about aims, ideas, and methods. Our task would be to elicit from the students the kind of talk about writing the larger community of literate writers customarily engage in. This would involve making allowances in course plans for *reading aloud*, asking students to *work in pairs to invent* material for texts, suggesting that students *co-author* texts, arranging for *small group work* on important writing problems, arranging the classroom as a *Zoellner-like writing studio* or *Garrison-like writing workshop* for the purpose of eliciting the vocal-to-scribal dialogue that results in effective writing.

The second recommendation is to re-evaluate the nature and kinds of writing assignments we prepare for our students. For instance, we might want to reconsider the effectiveness of assigning the one-hour, in-class essay, developing instead assignments that encourage writers to talk, write, and read as they proceed through the process of collecting information, focusing, designing, ordering, drafting, and, finally, clarifying the text for a reader. (Assigning a paper on a societal problem lends itself nicely to our sending students out to talk with authorities on the topic at the school or in the community and thus may help to demonstrate the importance of the dialectical process in generating consequential discourse.)

The third recommendation is to consider ways in which we might redefine our roles. Rather than always thinking of ourselves as lecturers whose primary responsibility is to impart information, we might think of ourselves as *facilitators, co-workers, enablers, resources*, and even *referees*. In this way, authority in the educational process may be more equitably distributed, instead of residing solely with the teacher / lecturer as has been the traditional way of proceeding.

The final recommendation is to consider alternate ways of evaluating the writing of our students. For example, in addition to grading the finished texts students produce in response to formal assignments (and not according to some quantifiable scale), we might evaluate all of the drafts for those texts, the peer critiques students prepare for one another as they develop the final texts, readings of the early and final versions of these texts, and the collaborative exercises that prepare students for writing such texts.

I submit that if we act upon these recomendations we will have more active student writers, for we will be helping them to focus attentively on what their peers say in response to problems we prepare. We will help students to learn tact and responsibility and the ability to avoid destructive confrontations with different personalities. Above all, we will help students to engage in the ongoing conversation of humankind by allowing them "first to vest authority and trust tentatively and for short periods of time in the members of small, transitional working groups; then, more confidently, in the larger community that constitutes the class; and, finally, in themselves as individuals as they internalize the process and the values of the newly formed community of writers" (Bruffee, *SCW* 13).

Now, there are plenty of problems here--and plenty of opportunities for research as well. For one thing, we have to address those colleagues who think that we are allowing cheating, plagiarizing, and ghost writing in our classrooms. Similarly, we have to accept the challenges from those among our students who may feel that their individuality is being negated, or from those among our students who are just not prepared for active involvement. We can do more as classroom ethnographers to determine what kinds of social changes take place in the classroom and whether or not writing helps to produce these changes or is the result of social changes and interaction. Then, we can articulate our findings in order to initiate our opponents into our conversation. Whatever we do, I believe we must steadfastly affirm the notion that we can all get by with a little help from our friends. To become discouraged by challenges from our colleagues or our students will be to admit that collaborative learning is just another buzz phrase of our discipline.

Thank you.

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